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ABSTRACT

This paper, which probes current knowledge about the role of conflict in the formation and maintenance of children's friendships, presents results of an observational study of the spontaneous conflicts of nursery school children. Observed were 26 males and 27 females from two classrooms in a university's nursery school and one classroom in a child care center. Mean age of the sample was 4 years, 5 months. Focal children were observed over 10 weeks during play for 6-minute segments. Observers' descriptions of each child's activities were recorded. Friendship status was assumed whenever a child spent 25 percent or more of observed time with a given peer. Subjects were categorized as mutual friends, unilateral friends, or neutral dyads. Coders identified instances of conflict and conflict components; the latter included precursors, issues, resolution strategies, emotional intensity, outcome, presence or absence of aggression, subsequent proximity, and subsequent interaction. While contexts of conflict and issues of disagreement did not differ according to friendship status, friends used negotiation more frequently than did nonfriends. Friends also effected more equitable outcomes, had less intense conflicts, and more frequently maintained proximity and continued interaction. Conflicts involving unilateral relationships resembled those which occurred between neutral associates in modes of resolution, but unilateral peers' subsequent interaction was similar to that of mutual friends. (RH)

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# Friendship and Conflict: Synergies in Child Development

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To most of us, the essentials of friendship are reciprocity and commitment between individuals who see themselves more-or-less as equals. Our friends are "intimate associates." Children begin to use the word "friend" during the early preschool years, but without being able to articulate the mutuality and commitment that adults believe are essential in "being friends." With increasing age, friendship expectations undergo a series of transformations and elaborations, largely as a function of changes in the child's understanding of social reciprocity and its implications. Early expectations stress participation in common pursuits and concrete reciprocities. To ask a 4-year old "Why is Dylan your friend?" will elicit something like: "We play." Later, children expect friends to manifest mutual understanding, loyalty, and self-disclosure ("A friend is someone you can talk to who sort of has the same ideas as you have but has got different things that they introduce you to as well"). But older children also believe that friends have a special commitment to one another in the management of conflict: "A friend is someone you fight with, but not forever."

Currently, there is a paucity of information about conflict in childhood (C. Shantz, 1987), and very little is known about the dialectic between friendship relations and conflict

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management. Whether disagreements arise more frequently between friends than between acquaintances is not known; similarly, we know very little about the relation between friendship and either conflict elicitors or strategies used in conflict resolution.

Beginning in early childhood, however, children's relations with other children are known to be differentiated in terms of the time spent with them and certain other characteristics of their interaction. Cooperation and reciprocity emerge rather early as manifestations of what children come to know as "being friends," and these interactions are relevant to "becoming friends" as well (Gottman, 1983). Competition, which consists of an interdependency between two individuals such that the attainment of rewards by one individual constrains the attainment of rewards by the other, bears a complex relation to friendship. Competition does not seem to be a universal inhibitor of friendly relations, especially in early childhood. Even in middle childhood, friendships may support very intense competition in certain situations -- usually when subordinated to ongoing cooperation -- and especially among boys.

Conflict and competition, however, are words that describe very different social contingencies. A conflict consists of an <u>opposition</u> between two individuals: "when one person does something to which a second person objects (Hay, 1984, p. 2)." In sociolinguistics, words like "refusing, denying, objecting, prohibiting, and disagreeing (Garvey, 1984, p. 129) are used to anchor the construct. Exchange inequities may elicit disagreements (i.e., conflicts), but disagreements do not always

involve exchange inequities between individuals. Conflict and competition must be kept separate conceptually, especially when considering their implications for close relationships.

Conflicts have sometimes been specified more exactly than in terms of "disagreements" or "oppositions." Carolyn and David Shantz (C. Shantz, 1987; D. Shantz, 1986), for example, urge that the term be used only to describe influence attempts that continue to be pursued after being met once by resistance. Thus, conflict would refer to three-unit exchanges: A attempts to influence B; B resists A; A attempts once again to influence B. Other investigators (e.g., Hay, 1984) would include two-unit exchanges: A attempts to influence B; B resists A. In our view, there is little to be gained by arguing abstractly about usage. Whether two-unit disagreements differ from three-unit disagreements needs to be determined empirically, i.e., by observation of differences in antecedents and outcomes. Until such data are available, our main concern is only to differentiate disagreements from aggression, on the one hand, and from competition, on the other -- distinctions which can be made relatively easily.

In the remainder of this presentation we want to do two things: a) consider what is known about the role of conflict in the formation and maintenance of children's friendships; and b) present results from an observational study of the conflicts arising spontaneously between nursery school children, a study that was designed to shed light on the connection between friendship and conflict.

Previous studies

Friendship formation. What are the consequences of the conflicts that inevitably occur during the time that children are becoming friends? Rizzo (1987) argues that these disputes play an important and necessary role in friendship formation -- i.e., that children initiate them in an effort to change their companions so that they will better conform to friendship expectations. Along the way, disputes also allow children the opportunity to work out the terms of new relationships and to gain a better understanding of themselves as potential friends. Without these oppositions, children may not obtain the experience that enables them to negotiate subsequent challenges. At the same time, when asked why two individuals do not become friends, youngsters between the ages of 6 and 10 more frequently mention disagreements than any other reason. Thus, a "climate of disagreement" is believed by children to discourage friendship formation even though there may be constructive benefits if the conflicts are not too pervasive.

Children's conversations suggest that those who are becoming friends use softer modes of conflict management than those who are not. Gottman (1983) found that children, initially strangers, who "hit it off" over two months, were especially likely to give reasons for disagreements, to issue weak demands (rather than strong ones) which were complied with, and to avoid extended "disagreement chains." The observations showed more consistent correlation between agreements and friendship outcome, however, than between disagreements and these outcomes.

Ongoing friendships. When the interaction between longer-

term friends is contrasted with the interaction between nonfriends, conflict and its management shows some differentiation between the two. Green (1933) compared 10 pairs of preschool children who were best friends (they spent substantially more of their time with each other than with other children) and 10 pairs who were not (children whose relations with each other were not differentiated in this manner). Not only did the two groups differ in the amount of friendly interaction occurring between individuals but the friends also evidenced more quarrelling with each other than did the nonfriends. More recently, Hinde and his colleagues (Hinde, Titmus, Easton, & Tamplin, 1985) showed that nursery school children who were "strong associates" displayed both more active hostility (i.e., assaults or threats) and reactive hostility (i.e., refusals and resistance) toward one another than nonassociates did.

And Gottman (1983) compared the incidence of agreements and disagreements occurring in the conversations of preschool-aged friends and those occurring between strangers (a companion experiment to the one described above). Neither agreements nor disagreements among the "hosts" (who were in their own homes) varied according to friendship status, but "guests" (who were not in their own homes) both agreed and disagreed more with their friends than with strangers. From other studies, we know that small groups of preschool-aged friends more effectively utilize resources than nonfriends do (Charlesworth & LaFreniere, 1983) and that friends allow one another more ready entry into their social groupings than nonfriends do (Ladd, 1983). Finally, the

interaction between children in a modified prisoner's dilemma is correlated with friendship: active involvement, mutuality of interaction, and equalizations were positively correlated with friendship while defaults were negatively associated with the closeness of the relationship between children (Matsumoto, Haan, Yabrove, Theodorou, & Carney, 1986). But we know very little about conflict resolution strategies and their relation to friendship and we know virtually nothing about these matters among school-aged children.

A new study

Close relationships among adults are known to have a strong basis in the exchange of rewards or rewarding outcomes (Berscheid & Walster, 1978). When exchange is equitable and involves outcomes that are important to both parties, maintenance of the relationship becomes an important goal. Consequently, friends might be expected to avoid the use of heavy competitive tactics and to use negotiation strategies that will produce more coordinated outcomes. This means that friends would avoid, to a greater extent than nonfriends, situations allowing only for "standing firm;" it also means that, when disagreements occur, conflicts will be less heated, and to a greater extent involve negotiations that lead to equitable outcomes. Positive bonds probably also lead to trying a wider variety of strategies than more neutral relationships, especially negotiations that involve concession and compromise. These notions provided a framework for our observations of nursery school children.

Subjects. We observed 53 children (26 males and 27 females)

from two classrooms in a university nursery school and one classroom in a child care center. The children ranged in age between 3 years, 4 months and 5 years, 4 months with a mean age of 4 years, 5 months.

Observations. After considerable training, observers were assigned to each classroom, observing the children over 10 weeks. Observations were conducted only during free play, which occasionally included play in a small gym for those in the nursery school and never outside (this was in winter). Focal children were observed for 6 minute segments in randomly-ordered sequences, with the observers narrating a complete description of the child's activity sotto voce into a cassette tape recorder. The amount of time individual children were observed ranged from 23.3 minutes to 44.8 minutes, with a mean of 35.5 minutes.

Identifying friends. The observational record was then segmented into 10-second intervals and the identities of classmates in proximity with the focal child were noted (proximity consisted of two children being within 6 feet of each other and not back-to-back). The kappa coefficient for these proximity scores was .91. Friendship status was assumed whenever a child spent 25% or more of the observed time with a given associate (see Hinde et al., 1985). Mutual friends were children who each spent at least 25% of the observed time with the other; "unilateral" friends were those in which only one child spent the required amount of time in proximity with the other. "Neutral dyads" were those in which both children spent less than 25% of the observed time with each other. The validity of these associations was established in two ways: sociometric

nominations turned out to predict proportion of time spent together in these observations and, conversely, children who spent more than 25% of their time with another child were also more likely to be nominated sociometrically as "someone you'd like to play with."

Conflict. Other coders reviewed the audio tapes to identify instances of conflict (2-act disagreements). Based on 20% of the observations, this was accomplished with agreement reaching .82 (Kappa). Still other coders reviewed the tapes, identifying the following components of each conflict: Precursors (whether or not the children were interacting prior to the disagreement); Issues (what the conflict was about); Resolution strategies (the action bringing about cessation of the conflict); Emotional intensity (the "heat" of the episode taken as a whole); Presence or absence of aggression; Outcome (winners/losers vs. compromise); Presence or absence of proximity following the conflict; and Presence or absence of subsequent interaction. Kappa coefficients ranged between .75 and .95, with a median of

Friendship and conflict. Our method for identifying friends yielded 20 pairs of mutual friends, 65 pairs of unilateral friends, and 357 neutral pairs. Most friendship pairs were same-sex; males had significantly greater numbers of both mutual and unilateral friends than females had.

A total of 146 conflicts between children were observed. Thirty-one (31) were observed between mutual friends; 50 between unilateral friends, and 65 between neutral associates. Considering the frequency of conflicts involving friends and

neutral associates: a) conflicts occurred at a slightly higher rate per unit time between mutual friends (3.0 per hour) and unilateral friends (2.9 per hour) than between neutral associates (2.2 per hour); b) many more neutral associates were available in the classroom than friends; but c) children spent more time, totally, with neutral associates than with their friends. These results mean that children experience more numerous conflicts with neutral associates than with their friends -- because so many neutral associates are available and the total amount of time spent with them is so great. The rate (per unit time) with which conflicts occur, however, is higher among friends than nonfriends.

Mutual friends' conflicts differed qualitatively from the conflicts of both unilateral friends and neutral associates. Chi-square analyses (3 x 2) were used to compare conflict characteristics across the three relationship categories. When the overall chi-square was significant, comparisons of mutual friends with unilateral friends and neutral associates were then made separately. Log-linear analyses were used to model interactions between friendship and sex differences. No sex differences were evident other than chance would account for.

The results are shown in Slides 1 through 4, in which conflict frequencies have been converted into percentages. Thus, Slide 1 shows that there are no reliable differences associated with friendship category in the occurrence of interaction before the conflict episode began. In addition, the issues about which the conflict occurred were distributed similarly for friends and

neutral associates (possessions were involved in more conflicts than behavioral issues in each friendship category). Thus, friends appeared not to disagree over different issues or in different circumstances from those characterizing unilateral friends or nonfriends.

Resolution strategies, however, varied according to friendship status (Slide 2): conflicts between neutral associates were more often terminated by "standing firm," as opposed to negotiation, than conflicts between mutual friends ($p < .02$). In this case, conflicts occurring between unilateral friends did not differ from the distribution shown by neutral associates, but did differ significantly from those occurring between mutual friends ($p < .002$). That is, unilateral "relationships" look like neutral ones -- in this instance.

Slide 2 shows similar results for conflict outcomes: episodes involving friends were more likely to terminate with equitable outcomes (i.e., winners and losers were less likely) than episodes involving neutral associates ($p < .006$). And, again, conflicts between unilateral friends looked more like conflicts between neutral associates than conflicts between mutual friends. This slide suggests that mode of conflict resolution and conflict outcomes may not be independent of one another. Indeed, other analyses show that equitable solutions are more likely to follow negotiation attempts than to follow "standing firm."

Slide 3 shows, first, that aggression occurred no more frequently in conflicts between mutual friends than in conflicts occurring in the other relationship contexts. This is an

important "non-difference." Conflicts between neutral associates, however, were more intense than those between mutual friends ($p < .001$). Once again, the conflicts between unilateral friends resembled those of neutral associates more than those between mutual friends.

Slide 4 shows differences in the events following the conflicts of mutual friends, unilateral friends, and neutral associates. Conflicts between mutual friends were more likely than conflicts between neutral associates to be followed by the children remaining in proximity with one another ($p < .001$) and engaging in social interaction ($p < .003$). In this instance, conflicts between unilateral friends were not significantly different from those between mutual friends; these conflicts, however, differed significantly from those between neutral associates.

To recapitulate: Among preschool children, the contexts in which conflicts arose and the issues about which they disagreed did not differ according to friendship status. Friends, however, used negotation, as compared to "standing firm" more frequently than nonfriends and effected more equitable outcomes. Conflicts between friends were less intense than conflicts between neutral associates, but aggression was not involved more frequently. Proximity was more likely to be maintained following resolution of conflicts between friends, and interaction between the children was more likely to resume. Conflicts involving unilateral relationships resembled those occuring between neutral associates in modes of resolution, but effects on subsequent interaction

were more likely to resemble those occurring between mutual friends.

The data suggest several conclusions: First, altercations between young children and their friends are not distinctive in terms of what the disagreement is about. Second, we have not discovered any contingency between conflict issues and resolution strategies. Therefore, the results suggest that friendship is associated with distinctive modes of conflict resolution rather than distinctiveness in what children disagree about. Specifically, "softer" methods of settling disagreements are used with friends than are used with neutral associates. Negotiation and disengagement are used more frequently and the disagreements are not as intense. The data concerning the events that follow conflict suggest that friends choose modes of resolving their differences that will maximize continued interaction to a greater extent than nonfriends. Indeed, a pattern is evident here in which it appears that preschool children know how to handle conflicts with their friends in ways that will not threaten these relationships and that will permit social engagement to continue.

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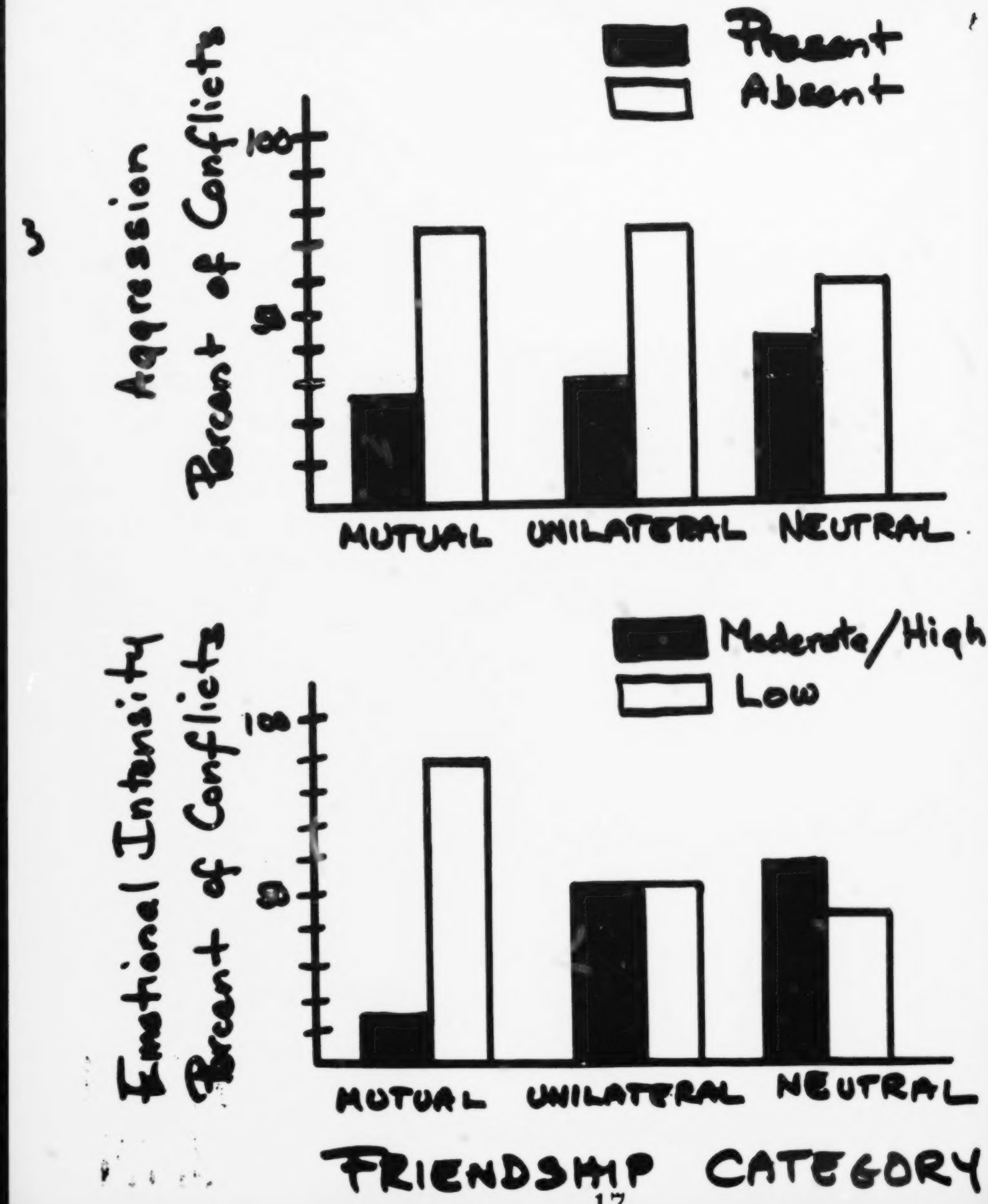
FRIENDSHIP CATEGORY

Stands firm
Disengage
TERMINATIONS
PERCENT OF CONFLICTS
100
50
MUTUAL
UNILATERAL
NEUTRAL
Winners/losers
Compromise
OUTCOMES
PERCENT OF CONFLICTS
100
50
MUTUAL
UNI-
LATERAL
NEUTRAL
FRIENDSHIP CATEGORY


Present
Absent
Aggression
Percent of Conflicts
18
9
MUTUAL
UNILATERAL
NEUTRAL
Moderate/High
Low
Emotional Intensity
Percent of Conflicts
18
9
MUTUAL
UNILATERAL
NEUTRAL
FRIENDSHIP CATEGORY

POST-CONFLICT PROXIMITY

PERCENT OF CONFLICTS

100

50

Present

Absent

MOTUAL UNILATERAL NEUTRAL

POST-CONFLICT INTERACTION

PERCENT OF CONFLICTS

10

8

Present

Absent

MUTUAL UNILATERAL

FRIENDSHIP CATE